

A McCain feeds her artistic side: Eleanor launches CD

National Post
Saturday, July 28, 2001
Page: F1 / FRONT
Section: Toronto
Byline: Rebecca Eckler
Source: National Post
Idnumber: 200107280091
Edition: Toronto
Story Type: Column
Length: 880 words
Illustration Type: P
Illustration: Black & White Photo: Yvonne Berg, National Post / Eleanor McCain sings about her family's travails, and their departure from their hometown, on her debut album.

The route Eleanor McCain chose for her career started, really, with Little Orphan Annie.

Strange, of course, since Ms. McCain grew up in a mansion as part of a close, loving and monumentally wealthy family. The child of billionaire Wallace McCain of McCain Foods Ltd. and Maple Leaf Food Ltd. fame, it's hard to believe Eleanor, unlike Annie, ever wanted for anything.

But it was the poor, parentless, red-haired girl who made the youngest daughter of Wallace McCain realize she wanted to be a professional singer.

"When I was nine, my parents took me and my sister to see Annie in New York," recalls Ms. McCain, 31, who has just released her first CD, and also moved to Toronto last week with her husband. "I saw all these young girls singing on stage. Before that, I never knew you could take singing further. I remember seeing that musical like it was yesterday."

Ms. McCain's debut album, *Intimate*, is a mix of classical, Celtic, ballads, folk and pop songs. Most of the songs are emotional, sometimes uncomfortably so, and are about everything "intimate" -- soulmates, death, overwhelming love and motherhood. The album features contributions from such notable artists as Natalie MacMaster, Chantal Kreviazuk and John McDermott.

On June 25, Ms. McCain sang the national anthems for Bill Clinton, the former U.S. president, when he was in town for a fundraising dinner -- a good start for a woman just now becoming better known for her talent than her famous last name.

When you get right down to it, her musical genes don't even come from the McCain side of the family.

"My mom is very musical," she says. "But my dad is totally tone deaf. I think he was surprised that he had a daughter who was so musical."

Eleanor McCain was raised in Florenceville, New Brunswick, a small community of 700. Musical training was scarce, to say the least.

"Me and my mom at Christmas would sing a lot," she says. "It would drive my brothers crazy."

When she began studying with a voice teacher at age 13, her mother would drive her over 150 kilometres away to Fredericton for lessons.

"It was a great place to grow up. Everyone in Florenceville was like an extended family. Everyone knew I could sing and would ask, 'So how's it going?'"

These days, when Ms. McCain walks into the rooftop bar at the Park Hyatt for a media interview, the first thing you notice is her height. Though she isn't actually tall, even with the beige open-toe heels she sports ("I'm about 5-6"), she seems to tower over others. When you drip with elegance and poise, as she does, you seem heads taller than everyone else in the room.

Her dress, which can only be described as pretty (everything about her, from her styled blond hair to her blue eyes, is pretty), has a pale yellow and pink floral design, with ruffles around the low-cut neck. She wears plain pearl earrings and a simple watch.

Ms. McCain glows as if she just came back from getting a facial. Some of the first words to come out from her mouth are, "I love my husband so much."

She and her businessman husband moved from Montreal (his hometown) to the St. Clair Avenue and Avenue Road area. Toronto will quickly become home for Eleanor, because her parents and three siblings all live here.

Her parents moved to the city in the mid-1990s after a bitter family feud and legal battle between the McCain brothers, Harrison, and her father Wallace, in Florenceville.

Wallace McCain still owns a stake in McCain Foods Ltd. but, in April, 1995, he conducted a \$1.2-billion leveraged buyout of Maple Leaf and is now the chairman of the company. Eleanor's two older brothers work for the family business. Her sister has just graduated after studying interior design.

"We were raised to have passion for whatever we do," Eleanor McCain says. "That you have to work hard and put in 150% to what you do. They led by example, for sure. They work hard and have passion

for what they do."

When people ask if she is related to the McCain family, she pauses and her answers become short. You get the feeling talking about her father and what happened with his brother is uncomfortable for her.

On her album, she sings about the falling out, and of the after-effects it had on her family, in a number called Green Hills of Home.

"My father's love for his sons and daughters," she sings, "is like an anchor." Then later in the song, "Gone like a lover, those green hills of home."

Her father, Ms. McCain says, is as supportive and proud as any father could be.

"He heard the album throughout the whole process," she says. "He would come to the sessions if he could, and he would hear songs half-way through them being finished."

Ms. McCain and her siblings, she admits, worried about her parents moving to Toronto.

"We were so relieved that they were happy, because my dad spent 35 years working in Florenceville. So we were very worried about them not fitting in here. But they do.

"Plus, we all live here so it makes it more like home."